

We extend to every customer and friend of the Arizona Central Bank our best wishes for a Very Happy and Prosperous New Year.

We thank you most sincerely for your patronage and good will during previous years and trust that the New Year of 1923 will bring new joys and prosperity.

## The Arizona Central Bank

Capital, \$675,000.00. Resources Over \$5,000,000.00

## The Strength of the Pines

By Edison Marshall

Author of "The Voice of the Pack"

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

Copyright by Little, Brown & Co.

Bruce saw the broad lands lying under the moon. There were hundreds of acres of alfalfa and clover to furnish hay for the winter feeding. There were wide, green pastures, ensilaved by the moon, and fields of corn laid out in even rows. The old appeal of the soil, an instinct that no person of Anglo-Saxon descent can ever completely escape, swept through him. They were worth fighting for, those fertile acres.

Not for nothing have a hundred generations of Anglo-Saxon people been tillers of the soil. They had left a love of it to Bruce. He knew what it would be like to feel the earth's pulse through the handles of a plow, to behold the first start of green things in the spring and the golden ripening in fall; to watch the flocks throng the breathless nights and the herds feeding on the distant hills.

Bruce looked over the ground. He knew enough not to continue the trail farther. The space in front was bathed in moonlight, and he would make the best kind of target to any rifleman watching from the windows of the house. He turned through the covert, seeking the shadow of the forests at one side.

By going in a quartering direction he was able to approach within two hundred yards of the house without emerging into the moonlight. At that point the real difficulty of the stalk began. He hovered in the shadows, then slipped one hundred feet further to the trunk of a great oak tree.

He could see the house much more plainly now. True, it had suffered neglect in the past twenty years it needed painting and many of its windows were broken. Bruce rejoiced to see that there were no lights in the east wing of the house; the window that Linda had indicated in the note was just a black square on the moonlit wall.

There was a neglected garden close to this wing of the house. If he could reach this spot in safety he could approach within a few feet of the house and still remain in cover. He went flat, then slowly crawled toward it.

Once a light sprang up in a window near the front, and he pressed close to the earth. But in a moment it went away. He crept on. He didn't know when a watchman in one of the dark windows would discern his creeping figure. But he did know perfectly just what manner of greeting he might expect in this event. There would be a single little spurt of fire in the darkness, so small that probably his eyes would quite fail to catch it. If they did discern it, there would be no time for a message to be recorded in his brain. It would mean a swift and certain end of all messages. The Turners would lose no time in emptying their rifles at him, and there wouldn't be the slightest doubt about their hitting the mark. All the clan were expert shots and the range was close.

The place was deeply silent. He felt a growing sense of awe. In a moment more, he slipped into the shadows of the neglected rose gardens.

He lay quiet an instant, resting. He didn't wish to risk the success of his expedition by fatiguing himself now. He wanted his full strength and breath for any crisis that he should meet in the room where Linda was confined.

Nevertheless, the stock of his rifle felt good in his hands. Perhaps there would be a running fight after he got the girl out of the house, and then his cartridges would be needed. There might even be a moment of close work with what guards the Turners had set over her. But the heavy stock used like a club, would be most use to him then.

Many times, he knew, skulking figures had been concealed in this garden. Probably the Turners, in the days of the blood-feud, had often waited in its shadows for a sight of some one of their enemies in a lighted window. Old ghosts dwelt in it; he could see their shadows waver out of the corner of his eyes. Or perhaps it was only the shadow of the brambles, blown by the wind.

Once his heart leaped into his throat at a sharp crack of brush beside him; and he could scarcely restrain a muscular jerk that might have revealed his position. But when he turned his head he could see nothing but the covert and the moon above them. A garden snake, or perhaps a blind mole, had made the sound.

Four minutes later he was within one dozen feet of the designated window. There was a stretch of moonlight between, but he passed it quickly. And now he stood in bold relief against the moonlit house-wall.

He was in perfectly plain sight of any one on the hill behind. Possibly his distant form might have been discerned from the window of one of the lesser houses occupied by Simon's kin. But he was too close to the wall to be visible from the windows of Simon's house, except by a deliberate scrutiny. And the window slipped up noiselessly in his hands.

He was considerably surprised. He had expected this window to be locked.



He Was Considerably Surprised. He Had Expected This Window to Be Locked.

Some way, he felt less hopeful of success. He recalled in his mind the directions that Linda had left, wondering if he had come to the wrong window. But there was no chance of a mistake in this regard; it was the northernmost window in the east wing. However, she had said that she would be confined in an interior room, and possibly the Turners had seen no need of barriers other than its locked door. Probably they had not even anticipated that Bruce would attempt a rescue.

He leaped lightly upward and slipped silently into the room. Except for the moonlit square on the floor it was quite in darkness.

He stood a moment, hardly breathing. But he decided it was not best to strike a match. A match might reveal his presence to some one in an adjoining room. He rested his hand against the wall, then moved slowly around the room. He knew that by this course he would soon encounter the door that led into the interior rooms.

In a moment he found it. He stood waiting. He turned the knob gently, then softly pulled. But the door was locked.

There was no sound now but the loud beating of his own heart. He could no longer hear the voices of the wind outside the open window. He wondered whether, should he hurl all his magnificent strength against the panels, he could break the lock; and if he did so, whether he could escape with the girl before he was shot down. But his hand, wandering over the lock, encountered the key.

It was easy, after all. He turned the key. The door opened beneath his hand.

If there had been a single ray of light under the door or through the keyhole, his course would have been quite different. He would have opened the door suddenly in that case, hoping to take by surprise whosoever of the clan were guarding Linda. To open a door slowly into a room full of enemies is only to give them plenty of time to cock their rifles. But in this case the room was in darkness, and all that he need fear was making a sudden sound. The opening slowly widened. Then he slipped through and stood ten breathless seconds in silence.

"Linda," he whispered. He waited a long time for an answer. Then he stole farther into the room.

"Linda," he said again. "It's Bruce. Are you here?"

And in that unfathomable silence he heard a sound—a sound so dim and small that it only reached the frontier of hearing. It was a strange, whispering, eerie sound, and it filled the room like the faintest, almost imperceptible gust of wind. But there was no doubting its reality. A living creature occupied this place of darkness with him, and was either half-gagged by a handkerchief over the face or was trying to conceal its presence by muffling its breathing. "Linda," he said again.

There was a strange response to the calling of that name. He heard no whispered answer. Instead, the door he had just passed through shut softly behind him.

For a fleeting instant he hoped that the wind had blown it shut. For it is always the way of youth to hope—as long as any hope is left. His heart leaped and he whirled to face it. Then he heard the unmistakable sound of a bolt being slid into place.

Some little space of time followed in silence. He struggled with growing horror, and time seemed limitless. Then a strong man laughed grimly in the darkness.

### CHAPTER XX

As Bruce waited, his eyes slowly became accustomed to the darkness. He began to see the dim outlines of his fellow occupants of the room—fully seven braven men seated in chairs about the walls. "Let's hear you drop your rifle," one of them said.

Bruce recognized the grim voice as Simon's—heard on one occasion before. He let his rifle fall from his hands. He knew that only death would be the answer to any resistance to these men. Then Simon scratched a match, and without looking at him, bent to touch it to the wick of the lamp.

The tiny flame sputtered and flickered, filling the room with dancing shadows. Bruce looked about him.

Simon sat beside the fireplace, the lamp at his elbow. As the wick caught, the light brightened and steadied, and Bruce could see plainly. On each side of him, in chairs about the walls, sat Simon's brothers and his blood relations that shared the estate with him. They were huge, gaunt men, most of them dark-bearded and sallow-skinned, and all of them regarded him with the same gaze of speculative interest.

Bruce did not flinch before their gaze. He stood erect as he could, instinctively defiant.

"Our guest is rather early," Simon began. "Dave hasn't come yet, and Dave is the principal witness."

A bearded man across the room answered him. "But I guess we ain't goin' to let the prisoner go for lack of evidence."

The circle laughed then—a harsh sound that was not greatly different from the laughter of the coyotes on the sagebrush hills. But they sobered when they saw that Simon hadn't laughed. His dark eyes were glowing.

"You, by no chance, met him on the way home, did you?" he asked.

"I wish I had," Bruce replied. "But I didn't."

"I don't understand your eagerness. You didn't seem overly eager to meet us."

Bruce smiled wanly. These wilderness men regarded him with fresh interest. Somehow, they hadn't counted on his smiling. It was almost as if he were of the wilderness breed himself, instead of the son of cities. "I'm here, am I not?" he said. "It isn't as if you came to my house first."

"Yes, you're here," Simon confirmed. "And I'm wondering if you remember what I told you just as you left Martin's store that day—that I gave you man two warnings."

"I remember that," Bruce replied. "I saw no reason for listening to you. I don't see any reason now, and I wouldn't if it wasn't for that row of guns."

Simon studied his pale face. "Perhaps you'll be sorry you didn't listen, before this night is over. And there are many hours yet in it. Bruce—you came up here to these mountains to open old wounds."

"Simon, I came up here to right wrongs—and you know it. If old wounds are opened, I can't help it." "And tonight," Simon went on as if he had not been answered, "you have come unbidden into our house. It would be all the evidence the courts would need, Bruce—that you crept into our house in the dead of night. If anything happened to you here, no word could be raised against us. You were a brave man, Bruce."

"So I can suppose you left the note?"

The circle laughed again, but Simon silenced them with a gesture. "You're very keen," he said.

"Then where is Linda?" Bruce's eyes hardened. "I am more interested in her whereabouts than in this talk with you."

"The last seen of her, she was going up a hill with Dave. When Dave returns you can ask him."

The bearded man opposite from Simon uttered a short syllable of a laugh. "And it don't look like he's going to return," he said. The knowing look on his face was deeply abhorrent to Bruce. Curiously, Simon's face flushed, and he whirled in his chair.

"Do you mean anything in particular, Old Bill?" he demanded.

"It looks to me like maybe Dave's forgot a lot of things you told him, and he and Linda are havin' a little sparkin' time together out in the brush."

The idea seemed to please the clan. But Simon's eyes glowed, and Bruce himself felt the beginnings of a blind rage that might, unless he held hard upon it, hurl him against their remorseless weapons. "I don't want any more such talk out of you, Old Bill," Simon reproved him, "and we've talked enough, anyway." His keen eyes studied Bruce's flushed face. "One of you give our guest a chair and fix him up in it with a thong. We don't want him flying off the coop and getting shot until we're done talking to him."

One of the clansmen pushed a chair forward with sudden force, striking Bruce in the knees and almost knocking him over. The circle leered, and he sat down in it with as much ease as possible. Then one of the men looped his arms to the arms of the chair with thongs of buckskin. Another thong was tied about his ankles. Then the clansmen went back to their chairs.

"I really don't see the use of all these dramatics," Bruce said coldly. "And I don't particularly like veiled threats. At present I seem to be in your hands."

"You don't seem to be," Simon answered with reddening eyes. "You are."

"I have no intention of saying I'm sorry I didn't heed the threats you gave me before—and as to those I've heard tonight—they're not going to do you any good, either. It is true that you found me in the house you occupy in the dead of night—but it isn't your house to start with. What a man seizes by murder isn't his."

"What a man holds with a hard fist and his rifle—in these mountains—is his," Simon contradicted him.

"Besides, you got me here with a trick," Bruce went on without heeding him. "So don't pretend that any wickedness you do tonight was justified by my coming. You'll have to answer for it just the same."

Simon leaned forward in his chair. His dark eyes glowed in the lamplight. "I've heard such talk as that before," he said. "I expect your own father talked like that a few times himself."

The words seemed to strike straight home to the gathered Turners. The moment was breathless, weighted with suspense. All of them seemed straining in their chairs.

Bruce's head bowed, but the veins stood out beneath the short hair on his temples, and his lips trembled when he answered. "That was a greater wickedness than anything you can do tonight. And you'll have to answer for it all the more."

He spoke the last sentence with a calm assurance. Though spoken softly,



Simon Stood Up and Bruce Sprang From His Chair Like a Wildcat.

"Everything is Tolerable Clear to Us Already," Simon said, "Except Your Sentence."

ly, the words rang clear. But the answer of the evil-hearted man before him was only a laugh.

"And there's one thing more I want to make clear," Bruce went on in the strong voice of a man who had conquered his terror. And it was not because he did not realize his danger. He was in the hands of the Turners, and he knew that Simon had spoken certain words that, if for no other reason than his reputation with his followers, he would have to make good. Bruce knew that no moment of his life was ever fraught with greater peril. But the fact itself that there were no

were going to wait in trees tonight by the carcass and shoot the Killer when he comes back after another meal—something that likely won't happen until about midnight if he runs true to form. But it won't be necessary now.

We're going to haul the carcass away—down wind where he won't smell it. And we're going to leave you there in its place to explain to him what became of it."

Bruce felt their glowing eyes upon him. Exultation was creeping over the clan; once more their leader had done himself proud. It was such suggestions as this that kept them in awe of him.

And they thought they understood. They supposed that the night would be of the utter depths of terror to the tenderfoot from the cities, that the bear would sniff and wander about him, and perchance the man's hair would be turned quite white by morning. But being mountain men, they thought that the actual danger of attack was not great. They supposed that the inborn fear of men that all animals possess would keep him at a distance. And, if by any unlikely chance the theft of the beef carcass should throw him into such a rage that he would charge Bruce, no harm in particular would be done. The man was a Folger, an enemy of the clan, and after once the telltale ropes were removed, no one would ask questions about the mutilated, broken thing that would be found next morning in the pasture. The story would carry down to the settlements merely as a fresh atrocity of the Killer, the last and greatest of the grizzlies.

But they had no realization of the full dreadfulness of the plan. They hadn't heard the more recent history of the Killer—the facts that Simon had just learned from Dave. Strange and dark conjecturing occupied Simon's mind, and he knew—in a moment's thought—that something more than terror and indignity might be Bruce's fate. But his passion was ripe for what might come. The few significant facts that they did not know were merely that the Killer had already found men out, that he had learned in an instant's meeting with Hudson beside Little river that men were no longer to be feared, and worse, that he was raving and deadly from the pain of the wound that Bruce's bullet had inflicted.

The circle of faces faded out for both of them as the eyes of Bruce and Simon met and clashed and battled in the silent room.

### CHAPTER XXI

"If Simon Turner isn't a coward," Bruce said slowly to the clan, "he will give me a chance to fight him now."

The room was wholly silent, and the clan turned expectant eyes to their leader. Simon scowled, but he knew he had to make answer. His eyes crept over Bruce's powerful body. "There is no obligation on my part to answer any challenges by you," he said. "You are a prisoner. But if you think you can sleep better in the pasture because of it, I'll let you have your chance. Take off his ropes."

A knife slashed at his bonds. Simon stood up, and Bruce sprang from his



Simon Stood Up and Bruce Sprang From His Chair Like a Wildcat.

chair like a wildcat, aiming his hardened knuckles straight for the leering lips. He made the attack with astonishing swiftness and power, and his intention was to deliver at least one terrific blow before Simon could get his arms up to defend himself. He had given the huge clan leader credit for tremendous physical strength, but he didn't think that the heavy body could move with real agility. But the great muscles seemed to snap into tension, the head ducked to one side, and his own huge fists struck out.

If Bruce's blow had gone straight home where it had been aimed, Simon would have had nothing more to say for a few moments at least. The leap had been powerful and swift yet wholly inaccurate. And the reason was just that his wrists and ankles had been numbed by the tight thongs by which they had been confined. Simon met the leap with a short, powerful blow into Bruce's face; and he reeled backward. The arms of the clansmen alone kept him from falling.

The blow seemed to daze Bruce; and at first his only realization was that the room suddenly rang with harsh and grating laughter. Then Simon's words broke through it. "Put back the thongs," he ordered, "and go get your horses."

Bruce was dimly aware of the falling of a silence, and then the arms of strong men half carrying him to the door. But he couldn't see plainly as

first. He knew that the clan had brought their horses and were waiting for Simon's command. They loosened the ropes from about his ankles, and two of the clansmen swung him on to the back of a horse. Then they passed a rope under the horse's belly and tied his ankles anew.

Simon gave a command, and the strange file started. The night air dispelled the mists in Bruce's brain, and full realization of all things came to him again.

One of the men—he recognized him as Young Bill—led the horse on which he rode. Two of the clansmen rode in front, grim, silent, incredibly tall figures in the moonlight. The remainder rode immediately behind. Simon himself, bowed in his saddle, kept a little to one side. Their shadows were long and grotesque on the soft grass of the meadows, and the only sound was the soft footfall of their mounts.

A full mile distant across the lush fields the cavalcade halted about a grotesque shadow in the grass. Bruce didn't have to look at it twice to know what it was: the half-devoured body of the yearling calf that had been the Killer's prey the night before. From thence on, their operations became as outlandish occurrences in a dream. They seemed to know just what to do. They took him from the saddle and bound his feet again, then laid him in the fragrant grass. They searched his pockets, taking the forged note that had led to his downfall. "It saves me a trip," Simon commented. He saw two of them lift the torn body of the animal on to the back of one of the horses, and he watched dully as the horse plunged and wheeled under the unfamiliar weight.

Simon spoke in the silence, but his words seemed to come from far away. "Quiet that horse or kill him," he said softly. "You can't drag the carcass with your rope—the Killer would trace it if you did and maybe spoil the evening for Bruce."

Strong arms sawed at the bits, and the horse quieted, trembling. For a moment Bruce saw their white moonlit faces as they stared down at him. "What about a gag?" one of the men asked.

"No. Let him shout if he likes. There is no one to hear him here."

Then the tall men swung on their horses and headed back across the fields. Bruce watched them dully. Their forms grew constantly more dim, the sense of utter isolation increased. Then he saw the file pause, and it seemed to him that words, too faint for him to understand, reached him across the moonlit spaces. Then one of the party turned off toward the ridge.

He guessed that it was Simon. He thought the man was riding toward Linda's home.

He watched until the shadows had hidden them all. Then, straining upward, he tested his bonds. He tugged with the full strength of his arms, but there was not the play of an inch between his wrists. The Turners had done their work well. Not the slightest chance of escape lay in this quarter.

He wrenched himself to one side, then looked about him. The fields stretched even and distant on one side, but he saw that the dark forest was but fifty yards away on the other. He listened; and the little night sounds reached him clearly. They had been sounds to rejoice in before—impulses to delightful fancies of a fawn stealing through the thickets, or some of the Little People in their scurried, tremulous business of the night hours. But lying helpless at the edge of the forest, they were nothing to rejoice in now. He tried to shut his ears to them.

He rolled again to his back and tried to find peace for his spirit in the stars. There were millions of them. They were larger and more bright than any time he had ever seen them. They stood in their high places, wholly indifferent and impassive to all the strife and confusion of the world below them; and Bruce wished that he could partake of their spirit enough so that he could rise above the fear and bitterness that had begun to oppress him. But only the pines could talk to them. Only the tall trees, stretching upward toward them, could reach into their mysterious calm.

His eyes discerned a thin filament of cloud that had swept up from behind the ridges, and the sight recalled him to his own position with added force. The moonlight, soft as it was, had been a tremendous relief to him. At least, it would have enabled him to keep watch, and now he dreaded the fall of utter darkness more than he had ever dreaded anything in his life. It was an ancient instinct, coming straight from the young days of the world when nightfall brought the hunting creatures to the mouth of the cave, but he had never really experienced it before.

He watched with growing horror the slow extension of the clouds. Finally the moon swept under them.

The shadow fell around Bruce. For the first time he knew the age-old terror of the darkness. He no longer knew himself as one of a dominant breed, master of all the wild things in the world. He was simply a living creature in a grim and unconquered world, alone and helpless in the terror of the darkness.

The moonlight alternately grew and died as the moon passed in and out of the heavier cloud patches. Winds must have been blowing in the high lanes of the air, but there was no breath of them where Bruce lay. The doors of escape open to him, and he was face to face with his destiny, steeled him all the more.

The boy that had been awakened in his bed at home by the ring of the door. But he couldn't see plainly as

(Continued next week)